

## **Petraeus scene: protests, political skirmishing**

In the hearing room: outbursts, sparring as one freshman agonizes

By Tom Curry

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WASHINGTON - More than one battle was going on inside the hearing room in the Cannon House Office Building as Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker testified Monday on the U.S. future in Iraq before two House committees.

One battle was between supporters and opponents of the continued U.S. military deployment in Iraq.

Another was between Republicans eager to play up a full-page New York Times ad run by the anti-war group Moveon.org mocking Petraeus as “General Betray Us” — and Democrats irate that the Republicans kept bringing up that ad.

By the third hour of Monday’s hearing, Republican members seemed to have figured out exactly how to provoke an outburst from anti-war demonstrators in the back of the hearing room: Rep. Jim Saxton, R-N.J. held up the New York Times ad and lamented, “This ad makes me really sad.”

Sure enough, a demonstrator began shouting from the back of the room, prompting Armed Services Committee Chairman Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo., to demand silence and to say that such outbursts would not be tolerated.

### **Democrats and Moveon.org**

The Moveon.org ad seemed to have wrong-footed the critics of the war on the committee by giving the Republicans a convenient talking point: Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Fla., used her time to observe that Democrats “have an opportunity to use this hearing to distance themselves” from Moveon.org and its ad.

“Point of order, Mr. Chairman!” snapped Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, an outspoken war critic. “Nobody has to distance themselves from something they weren’t associated with.”

Democrats went into Monday’s hearing knowing that two things were creeping ever closer: the 2008 elections, and the potential handoff of responsibility for the Iraq morass to a Democratic president.

In politics, it does no good to draw attention to one’s own inability to change policy.

But Democrats in the hearing room knew that, for now, their leader, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, lacked the votes to end the funding and force the troops to be withdrawn.

On May 24, the last time funding came up for a vote, Pelosi and 140 of her Democratic colleagues voted against the funds.

But 86 House Democrats voted with nearly all House Republicans to keep funds flowing.

### **Key role of Democratic freshman**

Rep. Brad Ellsworth, D-Ind., is one of those 86 Democrats, and a member of the Armed Services Committee.

Ellsworth is one of Pelosi's "majority makers" — a freshman who won a Republican district last year — so his views and his fate were, from an electoral perspective, what Monday's hearing was all about.

He represents a district that President Bush carried in 2004 with 62 percent of the vote, and he can expect to have a competitive race to keep his seat next year.

After sitting through the first three hours of testimony, Ellsworth said, "There's a lot of questions to be asked yet.... I've said this many times: I'll never vote to cut funding for our troops that is intended to keep them safe and let them do their jobs and get them home."

Ellsworth, who had returned from Iraq at 6:30 Monday morning, noted, "The generals I met with over there were encouraging. There were what appeared to be baby-step successes. I'm just not sure the American people are satisfied with baby steps at this point."

Ellsworth said he is still looking for "some kind of new direction." But he opposes a mandatory date to begin withdrawal of troops.

On the other side of the issue was another Democratic freshman member of the Armed Services Committee, Rep. Carol Shea-Porter, D-N.H., who voted against funds for the deployment and said after the hearing ended that nothing Petraeus said had caused her to change her mind

Violence had declined in some places, she said, simply because ethnic cleansing had occurred. "The neighborhoods (in Baghdad) that were mixed are gone now, and you just see Sunni or Shia.... It's a horrible thing. It shows there wasn't any political reconciliation, which was the whole point of this so-called surge."

With the election 14 months away, Ellsworth wished the hearing hadn't been so politicized.

Alluding to the Republicans' constantly raising Moveon.org's "General Betray Us" ad, the Indiana Democrat complained, "This is not the place for this political bickering about an ad in the New York Times. It's counter-productive to what this body has to do. We don't need that kind of stuff."

Given the crucial role played by Ellsworth and other Pelosi "majority makers," the task for most of the anti-war Democrats at Monday's hearing was to express opposition to the deployment and try to point out flaws in the Petraeus view of events in Iraq.

Rep. Gary Ackerman, D-N.Y. complained that the effort in Iraq was not integral to the struggle against international terrorism and if it were, then Petraeus would be irresponsible to recommend a drawdown of any troops from Iraq.

Petraeus himself made news by:

- Recommending the withdrawal of five Marine brigade combat teams by December — a withdrawal that Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., called "token," but that Petraeus insisted was "significant."
- Repeatedly emphasizing that Iranian intervention remains a large and growing threat in Iraq.

The mere mention of Iran by Petraeus was a flashpoint for the raucous anti-war contingent in the back of the hearing room.

At one point, when Petraeus discussed an Iranian "proxy war" against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq, a demonstrator bellowed, "That's a lie, you're lying!"

A frustrated Skelton again demanded that the protestor be removed. It was a long day for Skelton.